

Residents, regulators pick apart desal plan

Desalination
Comments show citizens
defined uphill battle

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SANTA CRUZ — The recent release of all public comments related to an environmental analysis of seawater desalination clearly demonstrate why Santa Cruz officials decided to halt planning on a \$130 million project.

During a rare 90-day review period, state and federal regulators, as well as scientists and environmental organizations, raised questions about alternatives, impacts on wildlife and a host of other issues.

But even a small sampling of the

SEE DESAL ON A5

DESAL

Continued from A1

403 written and oral comments about the draft environmental impact report reveal it was really objection from every day citizens that defined the uphill climb officials faced in convincing ratepayers to vote for the project.

"One of my biggest concerns about the draft EIR concerning the desal plant is that it reads like it was written as a rubber stamp to back up a decision that had already been made," 50-year resident Anne Smith Easley wrote.

Easley was among dozens who feared noise and visual impacts on the coast, as well as plans by the city and its desal partner, Soquel Creek Water District, to offset high energy use partially by buying credits off-site.

Others challenged the stated purpose — to generate a new water source in the face of drought and overtaxed aquifers — saying unchecked growth or unrealized conservation caused shortages. Many recommended augmenting storage operations, transferring water between neighboring agencies and awaiting state approval for direct use of recycled waste water.

"A desalination plant is too expensive to construct and operate," Westside resident

ON THE NET

All of the comments from the public and regulators concerning the draft environmental impact report of a proposed desalination plant can be read at www.scwd2desal.org.

Dan Chen wrote. "Other more economical methods must be implemented."

The City Council on Oct. 8 approved outlines of a plan to reset the desal debate, voting unanimously to broaden public engagement around alternatives. Part of the plan will entail options for how and whether to complete the environmental study, which opponents criticize because it will require more money on top of \$1.6 million already spent on the report.

City Manager Martín Bernal said he intends by year's end to recommend what the council should do, understanding criticism that completing the report while exploring other solutions could look like double speak.

"I recognize we want to have a process that is transparent and open to looking at all the alternatives," he said. "We just have to make sure we go through a process and do appropriate environmental review. To the extent we can salvage or re-purpose some of what we have already done, that would be useful."

Kim Adamson, general

manager for the Soquel Creek district, supports addressing public comments in stages. Tackling the alternatives first, she said, might help inform the city's new direction of letting the public investigate other supply options.

"We are recommending we just address the questions, not doing a formal (completion)," she said.

BIG TURNOUT

Approximately 300 individuals, organizations or agencies commented on the report, some submitting multiple written remarks or speaking during public hearings. Eighteen governmental agencies weighed in.

One of the most highly anticipated letters came from Tom Luster, the state Coastal Commission's point man on desal. He reinforced the need for more choices.

"From the information provided, it appears that other combinations of project alternatives, including some that the EIR eliminated without full review, could provide the desired amount of water supply while also reducing environmental impacts of the proposed project," he wrote.

Santa Cruz-based Ecology Action called for a better evaluation of water demand, saying, "The city's historic trend is that conservation programs have kept ahead of increased connections and created a declining trend in

water use overall. With the plan to continue and possibly expand these programs, and the ability to implement a water neutral development policy, why is an increase in water demand being included in the plan?"

While the majority of comments were critical, some respondents were in favor.

"As a long time Santa Cruz family — grandparents arrived and settled in 1920 — we know how important planning wisely for water usage is," wrote resident Louisa Capp, also pledging support from her husband and two adult children.

The Santa Cruz Business Council urged a study of the economic impact of creating a more reliable water supply versus not doing the project.

"We understand that, in light of future drought projections, difficult decisions must be made to protect this key economic resource, and preserve our quality of life," the organization wrote. "The possibility of substantial, mandatory water usage curtailment would impose dire consequences for business and the community as a whole."

All of the comments, including transcripts from two public hearings concerning the EIR, can be read at www.scwd2desal.org.

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